

Baltic Secession: Not Just If, but When

Lithuanians Hope for Negotiated Separation, Fear Kremlin Backlash

By Don Oberdorfer
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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R.—Despite the strong pleas of President Mikhail Gorbachev on a recent high-profile visit, this Baltic republic appears to be moving inexorably toward secession from the Soviet Union. The main questions are when and how the break will come and what its effect will be on Gorbachev's leadership in Moscow.

A two-day visit to Vilnius, Lithuania's capital, and talks with local leaders suggest that there is no consensus here on the timing of a declaration of independence from the Soviet state, although nearly everyone expects it in the next several years.

How to deal with this touchy subject was the focus of an extraordinary meeting of the Soviet Communist Party's policy-making Central Committee in December and may be an important issue in a Central Committee meeting called for this week that has raised worldwide speculation about Gorbachev's political future.

The hope expressed by the most authoritative Lithuanian leaders is that independence can be negotiated with the Kremlin in a way that maximizes future cooperation and minimizes the chance of economic or even military conflict. But whether such an accord can be negotiated, given the passionate feelings in Moscow against a breakup of the union of Soviet republics, is highly uncertain.

Vytautas Landsbergis, the musicologist who is chairman of Lithuania's most powerful political movement, the secessionist group Sajudis, said some Lithuanians want to proclaim independence immediately after the Feb. 24 local legislative elections, if, as expected, Sajudis candidates win a strong majority. Landsbergis, though, took a less confrontational position.

When a new provincial government is formed after the elections, he said in an interview, it may send a special delegation to Moscow "for negotiations with the Soviet government about our future." The Kremlin probably will not agree to talks for a while, Landsbergis said, but he expressed hope that after a while the Soviets will recognize "a new situation" and respond to offers of a peaceful resolution to the impasse.

The Sajudis chairman would not say when he thinks the break will come, but a key figure in the Communist wing of Sajudis, Bronislovas Kuzmickas, said he expects the rupture in "a year or a little more." A leader of the movement's non-Communist wing, Mechys Laurinkus, was more cautious, expressing the belief that Lithuania will be independent "eventually" but that over the next two years at least it will work out a status of greater autonomy within the Soviet Union.

The 35-member governing board of Sajudis—in what appears to be a carefully constructed if somewhat fragile compromise—contains 17 Communists and 18 non-Communists. Many of the Communists are members of the local Central Committee or of executive bodies of the Lithuanian Communist Party, which declared its independence from the party organization in Moscow in December and has stuck to this stand despite pressures and personal pleas from Gorbachev before and during his three-day visit here last month. The Communists are influential in the operation of local and provincial government, and the non-Communists have a solid connection with the church, academia and public opinion.

Landsbergis and several other Sajudis leaders said quick action toward independence could be taken—despite the high political risk of such action—in response to either of two unfavorable developments: A Soviet blockade of the local or regional Baltic economy to penalize independence sentiment or a sudden political reversal in Moscow—described by some as a coup—that repudiates Gorbachev or his reformist policies and seeks to clamp down on the Lithuanian independence drive.

After 50 years of Soviet control, Lithuania is deeply reliant on heavily

subsidized oil and other materials and services from the rest of the country, but the Soviet Union also depends on Lithuanian products—some of which are not produced elsewhere in the country—and on Lithuanian port facilities.

Kuzmickas said the possibility of a blockade has been discussed in depth with leaders in Latvia and Estonia—the other Baltic republics, which are also moving toward independence—and it was estimated that the three together could produce 90 percent of the food they need and 70 percent of other requirements.

There is no doubt that all-out economic warfare would hurt both sides seriously; nonetheless, Lithuanian economists consider the use of economic pressure by Moscow a real possibility. There is widespread suspicion here, so far not backed up by convincing evidence, that such tactics already are being employed.

A declaration of independence in the wake of a Kremlin political turnabout could mean arrests or other reprisals. Though not spelled out clearly in the interviews, the idea seems to be to act quickly and then rely on massive popular demand, as well as international pressure, for support. This is where the U.S. position on Lithuania and the other Baltic states, whose incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940 has never been officially accepted by Washington, becomes critical in the eyes of leaders here. While approving of the general U.S. stand, Landsbergis complained of "ambiguities" in pronouncements by President Bush and about views that "haven't been stated clearly."

"The main thing is for the great powers to consider Lithuania not as a normal Soviet republic, but as an annexed state," said Landsbergis. "They should consider any military action in Lithuania as a new aggression or as a continuation of the aggression of the 1940s."

Bush discussed the Baltic states with Gorbachev at their Malta summit in early December and reportedly reiterated the longstanding U.S. position on their status. U.S. officials said Bush also made it clear that the United States hopes the issues involved will be resolved peacefully and that Washington would oppose the use of force. Gorbachev responded that Moscow has no intention of using force to resolve the controversy, U.S. officials said.

The recent Soviet use of force in Azerbaijan was accepted by the United States and European nations as necessary in view of the inter-ethnic violence and breakdown of law and order there. Indeed, the Lithuanian leaders here did not see the use of troops in the South as much of a threat to them, saying any use of force in the Baltics could not be justified by ethnic strife. One official said, though, that local leaders are on guard against any effort "to organize some disorder or instability" that could justify the use of force.

By word and deed, especially on his recent trip to Lithuania, Gorbachev has used his persuasive powers to the full to discourage secession of the Baltic republics, but there is no indication here that he has had much impact on independence sentiment. Several leaders here said that the most important aspects of Gorbachev's Baltic mission were that it gave the Soviet leader a first-hand view of how overwhelmingly popular the independence drive here is, while at the same time it exposed the rest of the Soviet people to it extensively for the first time via Soviet television.

Standing in the midst of respectful but determined Lithuanians in the streets of this city, Gorbachev sought to persuade clumps of people, one by one under the eye of Soviet television, that their future is bright in a reformed Soviet Union. He had little visible success.



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